



PADEMIA PARLIAMENTARY DEMOCRACY IN EUROPE

Research Notes on Parliamentary Democracy 4/2016

The House of Commons, EU affairs and the media: a lot of press, but rather biased coverage

Katrin Auel

Series Editors: Katrin Auel and Resul Umit

This research note series is published by the
PADEMIA: Parliamentary Democracy in Europe.
It is funded by the European Commission.

The House of Commons, EU affairs and the media: a lot of press, but rather biased coverage

Katrin Auel

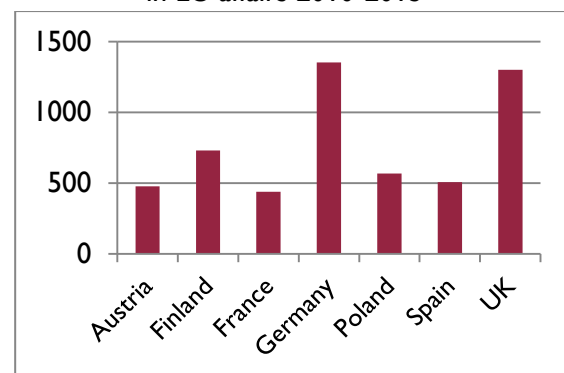
British discourses on democracy in the EU often emphasise the importance of the House of Commons when it comes to legitimising EU politics. Yet any added value by Parliament in terms of democratic legitimacy in EU politics depends crucially on the public's awareness of its engagement in EU affairs. Parliamentary activities that no one takes note of contribute little to democratic legitimacy. Against this background, PADEMIA member Katrin Auel investigates how the British press cover the House of Commons in EU affairs and shows that while the press pay comparatively much attention to Parliament, they also paint a very biased picture of EU affairs in the Commons.

To quote Abraham Lincoln's famous Gettysburg Address, democratic legitimacy is not fulfilled by 'government by and for the people' alone. In addition, 'government of the people' requires that citizens recognise a political system as their own. When it comes to the European Union (EU), national parliaments such as the House of Commons can provide such a sense of ownership for their citizens by communicating European issues, i.e. by making EU decisions and their consequences both visible and accessible to the public. This should not be misunderstood as 'advertising EU politics' or 'doing PR work for the EU'. Communication rather means providing political debate and different views on policy issues and decisions that are made at the EU level, but nonetheless affect citizens at home.

The problem is, of course, that citizens rarely get to see their parliaments in action – despite the introduction of parliamentary TV and the like: [BBC Parliament, for example, reached a monthly average of 0.053 per cent of all viewers between October and December 2015](#). Instead, most citizens experience politics through the news.

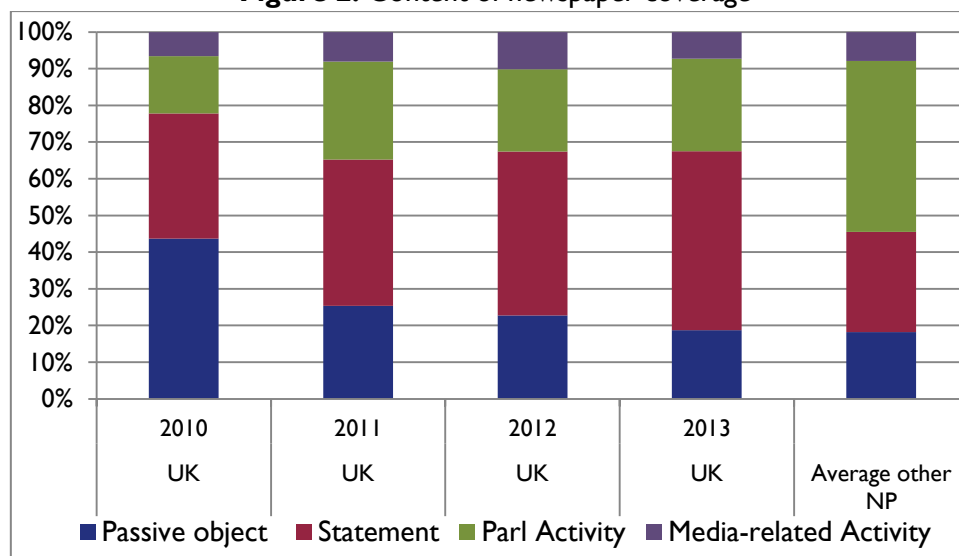
As our comparative research shows, the UK Parliament gets a lot of press in EU affairs. In fact, the House of Commons is - together with the German Bundestag - the parliament with the best newspaper coverage in the sample.

Figure 1. Newspaper articles on parliaments in EU affairs 2010-2013



However, it is a lopsided and biased picture citizens get of their parliamentary representatives' involvement in EU affairs. There are striking differences when it comes to the press portrayal of the House of Commons in EU affairs compared to the other parliaments (Figure 2):

Figure 2. Content of newspaper coverage



First, the House of Commons is presented far more often as a passive actor or as simply a stage for other political actors such as the Prime Minister. In addition, much of the coverage focuses on statements by MPs. It is important that MPs have the opportunity to provide their views through the media. However, statements are often reduced to mere sound bites, for which the press turn mainly to outspoken Eurosceptic Conservative, especially if they also have the glamorous ‘R factor’ – many of these MPs are among the Conservative Party’s top rebels as Table I shows.

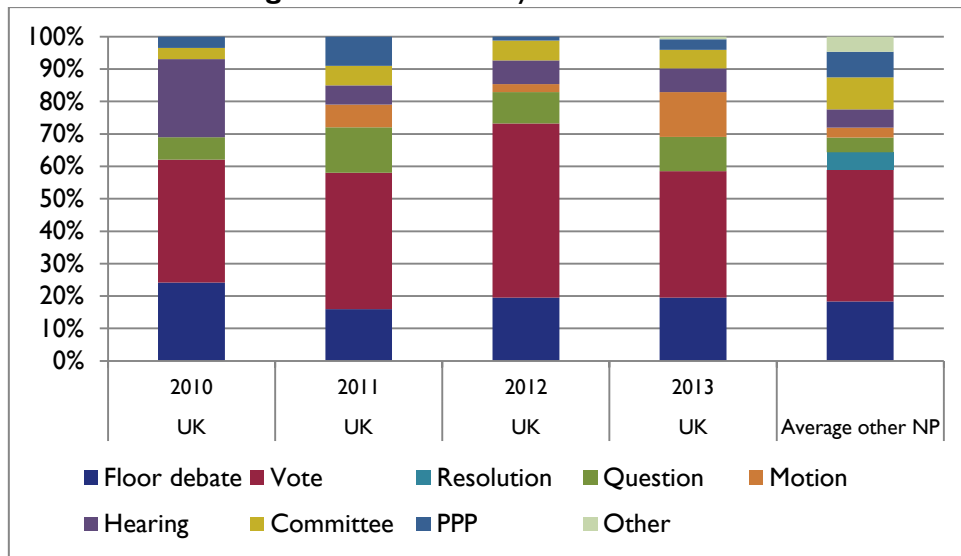
The coverage of genuine parliamentary involvement in EU affairs, in contrast, plays only a rather minor role – especially compared to the coverage of the other parliaments (see Figure 2 above). Within this category (Figure 3), it is hardly surprising that activities on the Floor of the House, such as debates or oral questions are the most visible in the press. What is more surprising is the very strong focus on the *outcome*, i.e. parliamentary votes, and the comparatively weak coverage of the debates preceding these votes. Thus, the British public gets to hear

what Parliament decided, but not very often a more detailed account of why.

Table I. The top 20 MPs in the media in EU affairs (2010-2013)

MP	Party	Top Rebel
Sir William Cash	CON	X
Douglas Carswell	CON	X
James Wharton	CON	
Ed Balls	LAB	
Douglas Alexander	LAB	
Bernard Jenkin	CON	X
Andrea Leadsom	CON	
Andrew Tyrie	CON	
John Redwood	CON	X
Peter Bone	CON	X
Mark Pritchard	CON	
George Eustice	CON	
Mark Reckless	CON	
Philip Davies	CON	X
Stewart Jackson	CON	X
John Baron	CON	X
Philip Hollobone	CON	X
Adam Afriyie	CON	
Gisela Stuart	LAB	
David Davis	CON	X

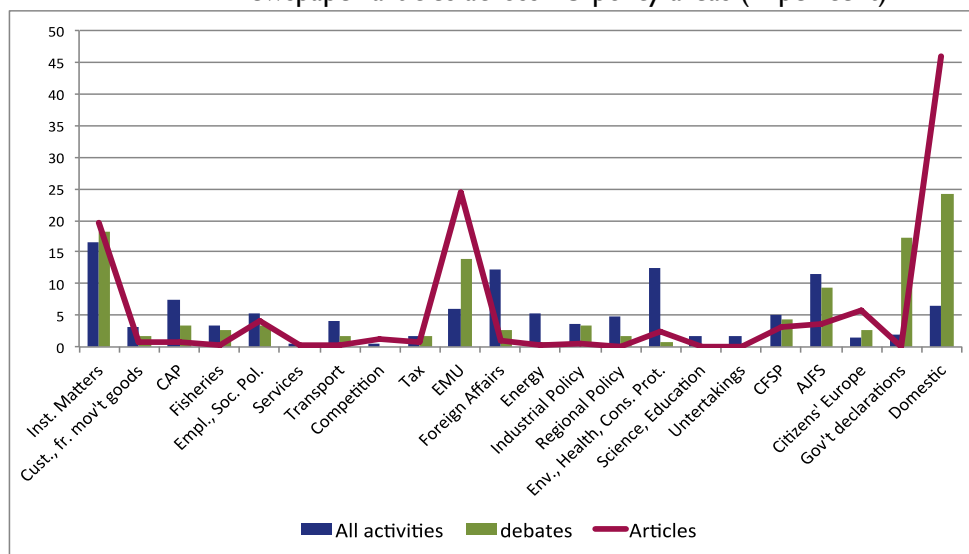
Figure 3. Parliamentary activities covered



There is a similar bias when it comes to the policy topics. The House of Commons has been active across all policy areas of the EU, and also debates a broad range of issues. Yet the press coverage of the House of Commons focuses mainly on three areas: institutional matters of the EU, which includes the EU budget, the multiannual financial framework or treaties and intergovernmental agreements; the Economic and Monetary Union, which is hardly surprising given the eurozone crisis;

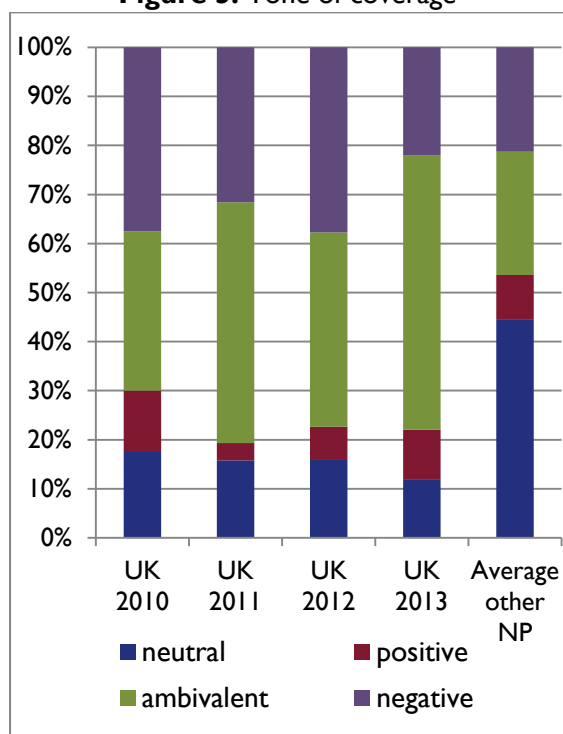
and issues related to domestic EU politics. The latter mainly includes issues such as the European Union Bill or – very prominently – the upcoming referendum on the UK’s EU membership. Thus, at least in the press, the impression given of the House of Commons is that of a parliament that is more concerned with its and the country’s relationship to the EU than with actual EU policies, an impression that does not really correspond to reality.

Figure 4: Distribution of all parliamentary activities, debates and newspaper articles across EU policy areas (in per cent)



Finally, when covering the House of Commons in EU affairs the press is rarely neutral. In contrast to the coverage in the other member states, the percentage of articles that convey a certain tone or sentiment, is much higher, and in many cases that sentiment or tone is negative or at least ambivalent.

Figure 5. Tone of coverage



To sum up, parliaments, as other political actors and institutions, need the media to reach the citizens. As welcome as parliamentary EU websites and parliamentary TV are, reading often highly technical documents on EU politics or watching a floor

debate are not the most exciting activities many citizens spend considerable time on.



The House of Commons is clearly newsworthy when it comes to EU affairs, but not in a way to help citizens get information on what their MPs are actually doing and how they are involved in EU politics



For the British press, the House of Commons is clearly newsworthy when it comes to EU affairs, especially in comparison to the press coverage of the other national parliaments by their domestic press. Yet Parliament is mostly a source for statements - sound bites - or portrayed as the mere arena for more important political figures. Citizens get less information on what their MPs are actually doing and how they are involved in EU politics. That the House of Commons is an active scrutiniser and debater of various EU policy areas, i.e. of vital issues that affect the daily life of UK citizens, is not often emphasised. As a result, the press seem to relegate the House of Commons to what Walter Bagehot (1867) famously referred to as those parts of the constitution ‘which excite and preserve the reverence of the population, - the *dignified* parts’ rather than portraying it as one of the ‘*efficient* parts - those, by which it, in fact, works and rules’.

*This post represents the views of the author and not those of PADEMIA. It draws on data from [Parliamentary Communication of EU Affairs \(PACE\)](#), a project funded by [the FWF](#), based on an analysis of all articles on parliament in EU affairs over four years (2010-2013) in seven member states and three newspapers each (two broadsheets, one tabloid; UK: *The Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Sun*).*



Katrin Auel is Associate Professor at the Department of Political Science at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Vienna.